Spiritual Resiliency in the Canadian Armed Forces
by Derrick Marshall and Yvon Pichette

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Introduction

Much is being written and spoken of these days with regards to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the resiliency of its soldiers, sailors, and air personnel in the wake of increasingly complex, difficult, and harrowing operations. These assignments have taken a physical, psychological, and a spiritual toll on military personnel and their families. According to the Department of National Defence Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR), “Resilience” is defined as:

“...the capacity of a soldier to recover quickly, resist, and possibly even thrive in the face of direct/indirect traumatic events and adverse situations in garrison, training and operational environments. Recovery from the greatest physical and mental hardships of the military environment is geared in the near term to the soldier’s current mission, but also is required in the long term throughout one’s career.”

Consequently, the CAF has been in the process of building its own concept of what constitutes “resiliency” for its personnel, as well as a complex set of resiliency organizations and programs. These programs are both proactive (in terms of providing “inoculation” to military personnel before operations), and reactive (through redeployment and reintegration strategies and programmes). These have the objective of helping military personnel and their families prepare for operational stress before deployments, as well as finding resilience from operational stress after deployments.

Recent research on resilience has shed light on existing human resources used to face adversity. It has identified sources of resistance, self-preservation, and resourcefulness during difficult times and experiences. Researchers began to use the concept and the term “resilience” in a metaphorical sense within the psycho-social sciences. They explored psychological and sociological
mechanisms which endowed resistance to adversity in relation to those things which lowered risk, stress, and vulnerability.

According to philosophy and theology, “resilience” also includes ethical, spiritual, and religious resources which encourage people to actively face adversity, to be able to resist a reduction or suppression of their capacities, or which bolster their capabilities in difficult circumstances through fostering their spiritual assets and skills.

Mental health issues do not only occur among deployed serving military personnel, and, [in the eyes of some], there is no direct link between deployment and occurrences of suicide. [Representing one viewpoint], the following conclusions were reached by Suicide in the Canadian Forces 1995-2012:

1. From 1995 to 2012, there has been no statistically significant change in male CF suicide rates;
2. The rate of suicide when standardized for age and sex is lower than that of the general Canadian population;
3. History of deployment is not a risk factor for suicide in the Canadian Forces.²

This may explain why issues related to resiliency also occur in civilian contexts when we examine and analyze such occupations as firefighters, first aid responders, and so on. This article is concerned with issues of mental health and spiritual resiliency among the entire Defence Team personnel (whether they have deployed or not), since spiritual resiliency issues can be a challenge to anyone.

How Do We Define Psychological/Spiritual Resiliency?

The Royal Canadian Chaplain Service (RCChS) defines spiritual resilience as “the ability to recover the emotional, psychological and physical strength required to adjust to diversity, or a traumatic change.”³ For the purpose of this article, this will be our definition of the kind of resilience that we will discuss.

Within the CAF, resilience is comprised of the following five component pillars:

1. Physical – whereby health is maintained through physical activity, nutrition, and good sleeping patterns.⁴
2. Psychological – according to psychiatrists Steven Southwick and Dennis Charney, authors of the book Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life’s Greatest Challenges, psychological resilience is a multi-dimensional ability to bend, but not break under life’s stresses. Someone might be highly resilient in their work lives, but less so in relationships, and they may fluctuate in different stages of their lives.⁵ Psychologists Susan Folkman & Richard Lazarus have contended:
Managing stress includes accepting, tolerating, avoiding or minimizing the stressor as well as gaining mastery over the environment seem to be the central processes in the management of stress. Anything that we do to adjust to the challenges and demands of stress, by way of adjustments made to reduce the impacts of stress, could be defined as coping. Thus coping can be viewed as constant changes in our cognitions and the use of behavioral effort to mitigate both external internal demands that are appraised as ‘taxing’ (Cummings, 1991) or ‘exceeding the resources of the person.’

3. Spiritual – at the heart and soul of wellness, spirituality is a driving force to total well-being. It refers to one’s value system (ethics, moral compass), one’s search for meaning and purpose in life, one’s experiences, and one’s connectedness with others.

4. Social – refers to good relationships with one’s family, friends, the community, and others with whom one shares common values, beliefs, or commitments which fulfill or nourish oneself personally.

5. Emotional – refers to how one manages emotional responses to events, such as joy, anger, fear, and so on, since all these responses can affect one’s state of being. This also involves one’s psychological outlook, such as self-esteem, intellectual/cognitive skills (such as problem-solving, analyzing, mental recall, and so on).

However, according to Dr. Deanna Messervey, a subject matter expert on defence ethical decision-making, there are actually two types of ethical decision making processes. The first is automatic processing (intuitive judgement), which includes a fast and effortless, autonomous system (which does not require controlled attention), and which is below the person’s level of awareness; and a deliberative processing (reasoned judgement), which involves a generally slow and effortful process, is linked to a central working memory (controlled attention), and which involves awareness.

The CAF clearly envisions a consensus for the need to approach resiliency in a holistic manner, as mentioned in Pillar Number 3, which includes the spiritual component.

In Contemporary Canadian Public Life, with the State’s Conscious Attempts at Official Secularism, Does Religion/Spirituality Have a Legitimate Place within the Public Sphere?

While there are public thinkers who would say a definitive “no!” to this contentious question, there is also an argument among some thinkers that spirituality or religion, as with any other comprehensive doctrine, should be acknowledged and managed by public leaders. In other words, the State must acknowledge and treat the entire spectrum of the human person (including religion/spirituality), and it must do so in a holistic manner. In this context, what we mean by religion is an organized and institutionalized response to human spiritual beliefs based upon transcendent revelation, general and specific revelation, which results in its own values and ethical code of behaviours.
For example, as was recently mentioned in an editorial in *The National Post*,¹¹ *The Ottawa Citizen*,¹² and in *The Globe and Mail*, The Senate Committee on National Security and Defence has suggested that the creation of a Muslim imam registry might be an excellent way:

“… [to] get the state in the business of deciding who is allowed to preach and teach which religion, and implicitly what they get to say while preaching and teaching.”¹³

Without advocating whether or not this proposal is the correct way to manage this issue, these authors believe that the State does have a responsibility to be informed and involved in some manner (even though many consider religion to be a strictly private matter), since what clerics believe, teach, and promulgate directly influences the public sphere to varying degrees.

Domestically, in a post-9/11 world, any attempt to relegate spirituality and religion to the private sphere in Canada will prove inadequate. Terrorist attacks on Western establishments in the name of religion/spirituality have proven that spirituality which is ignored or suppressed does not simply disappear from view, or from affecting a wider number of citizens. As a full-time Professor of Theology at Boston College David Hollenbach has elucidated, a private individual or private faith group’s spiritual and/or religious sensibilities provide a significant influence in the life of individuals and faith groups. This unconsciously or consciously influences their values (i.e., the way they live their lives, interact with the wider community and society, the way they tend to vote, whether or not to join the military, etc.) and all of which, thereby, eventually influences the public sphere in both indirect and direct ways.¹⁴

Internationally, religion/spirituality still plays a very integral role in other societies, albeit to different degrees. Among many other operations, the CAF was involved in a peacekeeping mission in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, was on operations in Afghanistan in the war against terrorism, and most recently, deployed the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) after the earthquakes in Nepal. In the midst of these operations we came to realize that our failure to take into account the religious/spiritual realities of those nations (whose religious world view strongly influences most aspects of their lives) clearly hampered our operational effectiveness. As a result, the CAF has recently developed a new doctrine regarding Religious Area Analysis (RAA) and Religious Leader Engagement (RLE). This doctrine now allows the military chain of command to understand the religious/spiritual culture and realities “on the ground” in a given theatre of operations, which may well have an impact upon the success of any given mission. The ultimate purpose of RLE is to gather all the appropriately involved religious leaders in a theatre of operations to meet for discussions as one element of conflict resolution and a resultant peace process.¹⁵
Whereas religion/spirituality impacts military operations writ large, it also can play a significant part in the healing of individual warriors after those same operations. When soldiers, sailors, and air personnel are significantly impacted in the course of their service to the public, they deserve every tool available to them in their healing and a holistic approach to their care. If it is effective, then a truly holistic approach should include a publicly funded, publicly administered and publicly supported spiritual resiliency component to any health care program.

Whereas spirituality and religion are important to psychological resilience for military personnel and their families, the question is not should we implement a spiritual resiliency program, but rather, what kind of program should it be and how should we implement it, so as to be both effective and acceptable in the CAF for all its personnel and their families? This is a delicate balancing act, given the plethora of spiritual, religious, and secular perspectives which exist in the CAF today. The CAF, as a public institution, is called upon to respect the freedom of conscience of all military personnel and their families, since the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees, among its fundamental freedoms, the freedom of individual conscience and religion (whether religious, agnostic, or atheist) and sets the foundation for the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service’s mandate to minister, found in Queens Regulations & Orders, Chapter 33 – Chaplain Services.16 Canadian military chaplains are, thus, called upon to care for all, at home and on operations, through the provision of religious/spiritual support and care for all Canadian military personnel and their families, wherever they live and serve, empowering them spiritually and morally to meet the demands of military service.17

The essential role of a Canadian military chaplain in such a pluralistic environment, working within a care-based ethos (rather than an ethos of proselytization) is not without its challenges. It has always been an ‘interesting dance’ for the Canadian Government to address the competing needs, demands and perspectives of religious, spiritual, and secular-minded interests within the public sphere. Canada is one of the only countries in the world to have attempted to separate Religion and State almost entirely in any official capacity, to the degree that some thinkers would seek to ignore religion altogether as an actor in or influence upon the public sphere. This was not the original intention of our nation’s founders, nor is it healthy for faith groups or for the public sphere.18 To reduce the interaction and influence of the State and Religion is to impoverish both. Elsewhere in the world this kind of separation of State and Religion is far less entrenched (i.e., United States). If the Canadian Government disengages itself altogether from religion and were to refuse a place for religion/spirituality in the public sphere, then whose influence would hold sway regarding faith-based schools (i.e., their financing, their curricula, etc.) and what these schools teach? For the common good of the whole of society, what should be sought after in Canada is for faith groups and their respective social, educational, and charitable organizations to be separate but not entirely private in nature, lest both State and Religion lose out on the possibility of a healthy mutual dialogue and influence (as opposed to any attempt at control of one another’s distinct spheres of responsibility) between the two.

There is significant evidence to suggest that religious/spiritual practices are effective in contributing to resilience, and should, therefore, be supported in a public resilience program.19 For example, during 17-20 November 2014, in an annual collective chaplain training event for 2nd Canadian Division to Canadian Army (CA) chaplains and other military and civilian personnel, psychologist Dr. Mona Abbondanza of the Université du Québec à Montréal, who specializes in cognitive behaviour therapy for anxiety disorder and depression in adults and seniors, underscored the value of spiritual practices on wellness and well-being in her presentation. She stated:

“The vast majority of empirical research, as well as clinical knowledge, indicates that religion has a positive influence on mental health, as well as on the ability of a person to function well. This goes beyond a lack of pathology or suffering to include positive traits…”20

Her presentation also elucidates a link between religion/spirituality and psychological resilience, due to its effects upon a person’s lifestyle. In general, regular spiritual and religious practices in adults results in less tendency towards alcoholism, fewer eating disorders, less incidence of divorce, less high-risk sexual behaviour, fewer homicides, and less incidences of participation in other criminal activities.31

Dr. Abbondanza has also presented the connection between spirituality and the practice of religion and psychological resilience within the military. Research results on combat-induced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) show spirituality and the practice of religion’s impact upon health and well-being, both for good and for ill. The positive effects of regular spiritual and religious practices in adults include increased resilience in the face of future life challenges, an increased sense of one’s meaning or purpose in living, and a strengthened capacity to use positive coping resources amid significant life incidences and/or crises. For example, post-deployment interviews of United States Marines on spirituality, religion, and the military underscored a sense of meaning or purpose which strengthened certain Marines’ capacity to use positive coping resources amid crises. However, a sense of meaning or purpose also included negative beliefs about safety, goodness, and the meaningfulness of the world, such as negative views of one’s relationship with God, beliefs that God is punishing or abandoning the individual, a loss of core spiritual values, and an estrangement from or questioning of one’s spiritual identity. Also, those suffering from PTSD are often also in spiritual distress, a distress which includes loss of faith, and difficulty reconciling one’s personal beliefs with wartime events.22 CAF chaplains are equipped to manage and counsel individuals in these thorny religious/spiritual issues as well.

“...those suffering from PTSD are often also in spiritual distress, a distress which includes loss of faith, and difficulty reconciling one’s personal beliefs with wartime events.”
“Resilience” in psychology may also be defined as the capacity to live, to succeed in life and to develop despite adversities. For the French psychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik, resilience “…is a complex process by which people who have suffered adversity are, against all negative prognoses, able to thrive.” Resilience might be said to be, “…the capacity of a person or a group to develop well, and to continue to project themselves in the future, despite destabilizing events, difficult life conditions and sometimes severe trauma”. He also suggests that this, “…art of navigating between torrents” is a facility which is not innate, but can be found in the roots of infancy, and in the relationship which parents have with their child.”

According to Professor of Psychology at the Université catholique de Louvain Vassilis Saroglou, where he is the director of the Centre for the Psychology of Religion, there are four essential religious dimensions of Spirituality and Religion which can be powerful resources in bolstering or restoring resilience. These are described as: “Believing (in the truth); Bonding (to a transcendent reality); Belonging (to a trans-historical group); and Behaving (in a virtuous way).” We could expect that each of these dimensions could play a role in bolstering resilience. The purpose of the following table is to juxtapose the spiritual person and a spiritual person who is not also religious, using the four essential religious dimensions and their traits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELIGIOUS &amp; ARELIGIOUS VARIATIONS (Abbondanza, 2014)</th>
<th>THE BIG FOUR RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS (Saroglou, 2011)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Believing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bonding</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognition</td>
<td>Emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Belonging</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social Ties</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaving</strong></td>
<td><strong>Behavioural Intent or Behaviour</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**A religious person**
- Who believes in a transcendent reality
- Who feels a bond to this transcendent reality
- Who belongs to a faith community
- Whose behaviour is guided by his/her religious beliefs, feelings and membership

**A spiritual but not religious person (areligious)**
- Who believes in a transcendent reality outside of a religious tradition
- Who feels a bond to this transcendent reality

Table 1 – Religious/Areligious variations plotted against four religious dimensions.
What is the CAF chaplain’s role in facilitating this art of spiritual resilience? Padre (Captain) Mario Sonier has stated how CAF chaplains facilitate the “Believing” aspect of spiritual resiliency:

Chaplains, and in particular, mental health chaplains, help CAF members adapt well to the reality of their situations, and assist them in their meaning-making process. They walk and talk with CAF members in order to help members feel reassured and empowered in their personal journey through life. In this sense, chaplains help soldiers to maintain “sanity” in chaos and operations, and guide them on their way back “home.”

The key role of a chaplain is to help people develop “meaning” in life. Resiliency involves a return to fullness of life, which presupposes a meaningful life to return to in the first place. CAF chaplains, amongst other caring professionals (i.e., psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers), are in the business of meaning-making for military personnel and their families. CAF chaplains in particular provide a meta-narrative (world view) in which to live and act in the world, they provide an ethical framework in which to navigate life’s uncertainties, and they offer a system of, and a means for, forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. As Padre Harold Ristau reminds us, CAF chaplains, in addition to providing religious services, also inculcate meaning through other important services, such as the provision of spiritual care, counselling, spiritual direction, and support.

As CAF chaplains, we are well aware there exist both religious and a-religious versions of these same four spiritual concepts. It is not necessary to espouse a theistic worldview, or to belong to a faith group, to benefit psychologically from these four spiritual concepts. There is a spiritual but non-religious approach to life (which is increasingly common in post-modern Canadian society, which embraces spiritual concepts, but which does not embrace the regular practice of religion corresponding to these spiritual concepts), agnostic and an atheistic manner of living out these four spiritual concepts. As well, with regard to the religious approach to spirituality, this is multifaceted. What about non-religious personnel and family members? What about the significant number of people who live their spiritual lives outside of organized institutions? If CAF chaplains were able to provide a voluntarily-requested regular, disciplined, and corporately-structured and pluralistic approach to the development of spiritual resiliency programs and services, these people, outside the realm and influence of church/chapel, mosque, synagogue or temple, might be positively reached and helped according to their spiritual needs. The use of labyrinths, healing circles, sweat lodges, praying the Daily Offices, meditation, pastoral care, and counselling, and various approaches to spiritual direction could all be very powerful tools in the CAF “tool-box,” at the service of military personnel’s resiliency training and recovery.

Conclusion

What specific or unique role does spirituality bring to the table that a secular/psychological approach cannot already fulfill by itself? Religion/spirituality offers a system of meaning-making and belief, an over-arching metanarrative (i.e., world view), a value system and a moral compass by which to navigate life’s vicissitudes. Religion, as a socially organized expression of spiritual beliefs and values, also offers ready-made community, spiritual resources stemming from thousands of years of wisdom and practice, and a vital sense of belonging and social support.

CAF chaplains also work as part of a multi-disciplinary team and can never work totally independently, but they are also an indispensable part of the CAF health care team, since – if it is true that spiritual resilience improves operational capacity of the CAF – it must be part of its holistic approach to healthcare. To be maximally effective, spiritual resilience practices must be: disciplined, intentional, regular and guided. CAF chaplains are specifically-trained professionals, qualified and experienced to intentionally and regularly guide military personnel and their families in disciplined spiritual and religious health care regimes.

CAF chaplains’ spiritual program and chaplaincy contribution to resilience is not to be accomplished along utilitarian grounds only, but strives for a more holistic and multifaceted approach to the issue of spiritual resilience. Its mission is to provide comprehensive religious, spiritual, and ethical support to military personnel and their families, to monitor and foster unit morale, and to provide support to the chain of command and the wider Defence Team Community.

We know that to implement a spiritual resiliency program requires a commitment to an introspective, organized, and institutional approach to resiliency that takes seriously the existence of the spiritual aspect of human existence (meaning-making) and organizational health. While CAF chaplains are one of many professions who treat this aspect of the whole person, we are a unique and valuable resource in the provision of care and tending to the spiritual aspect of health care and resiliency. The question remains: will the Canadian Government shy away from this important aspect of resiliency even though its professional practitioners already exist within the CAF and stand ready to help, or will they embrace this challenge and give the sailor, soldier, and air personnel every chance at health, happiness, and success in the conduct of their duties?
1. The concept of “resilience” is actually, first and foremost, a scientific one belonging to the realm of physics – referring to physical resistance to distortion or deformation (i.e., a metal bar would be considered resilient if it not only resists breaking or denting, but takes on its original form after shock or pressure).


4. Ibid.


7. The Royal Canadian Chaplain Service aide-memoire pamphlet “Achieving Spiritual Resilience”

8. Ibid.


10. The authors’ definition of that which constitutes religion.


15. Canadian Army Doctrine Note (CADN) 13-1, Religious Leader Engagement (RLE), 24 July 2013.

16. The principles of respect for the dignity of all persons, service to Canada before self, and obedience to lawful authority remain at the core of CAF military ethos. These core principles are essential to military capabilities in peace, in conflict, and in war.


18. Major Jon Derrick Marshall, D Min., “The Ethics of Exile, “Ottawa: in Theoforum, 24 June 2008, p.1. “The arguments often made for the marginalization of religion in Canada are those of inclusiveness and tolerance for all Canadians and the separation of Church and State in a pluralist democracy. Yet, the separation of Church and State in North American democracies has gradually come to be interpreted erroneously to mean, rather than a “line of distinction” of responsibility between pulpit and legislative desk, there should be an impenetrable wall that divides them altogether. It was never intended by the founders of the North American democracies that separation of Church and State would preclude these two institutions from influencing each other in a healthy, respectful and democratic manner; rather it was intended that no one religion could enjoy favoritism of influence or power over others.”


